

## News and stories

### **Mullane: In Bucks County, a monument to Gold Star families is unveiled**

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JD Mullane | [Buck County Courier Times](#)

The call that Grant Smith's son, Tristan, was killed in Iraq came from his wife on weekday in summer.

"Two Army guys showed up at our house. It was very early, like 6:10 a.m. I was already at work. So my wife was the only one home," said Smith, of Bryn Athyn.

"You know, I can't remember what she said, but I remember the phone ringing and I knew exactly what the call was before I picked it up."

He said this, and stopped. It was a few moments before he could speak again.

Army Spc. Tristan C. Smith was 23 when he was killed in Iraq Aug. 27, 2006. An IED was detonated, killing Smith and three fellow soldiers, and seriously wounding another.

Years have passed. The world has moved on. But for Grant Smith, time stands still. It's the fate of Gold Star families, those who've lost a loved one in war.

Saturday was their day in Bucks County. A monument to Gold Star families was unveiled and dedicated at Washington Crossing National Cemetery in Upper Makefield. There were speeches by dignitaries, among them Herschel "Woody" Williams, who started the movement to erect similar monuments around the country. Williams, 94, traveled from his home in West Virginia to attend the unveiling, the first Gold Star family memorial to be placed in a national veterans' cemetery.

Williams was a Marine corporal in World War II. His heroism at Iwo Jima earned him a Congressional Medal of Honor, which he wore during his remarks, delivered to about 200 people assembled beneath twin white tents.

"Those of us who have served in the Armed Forces of our country ... for us when the war was over ... we could consider it over," Williams said. "Loved ones, they don't have that privilege. It goes on and on, and will continue to go on."

What were their thoughts at that moment, all of these Gold Star mothers and fathers who sat before him, some who had lost sons a half-century ago in Vietnam?

"Maybe," Williams said, "precious memories when they were growing up, when they were small, when they got in trouble when they didn't do what they were supposed to do, those kind of things."

There were smiles when he said this, and some tears.

The monument was several years in the works, said John Heenan, of Ivyland, who, with his wife, Bernadette, co-chaired the committee that brought it to the veterans cemetery.

"It's our hug for the families," he said. "It's our prayer — we did not forget you."

Grant Smith said he and his wife, Kim, attend many events like this.

“Even though it rips open memories,” he said. “But I feel I have to go, just to have a Gold Star presence. What if there was an event like this, and no one showed up?”

The Smiths raised Tristan in Bryn Athyn, the oldest of their four kids.

“He was my first born. Three pounds at birth and given a 30 percent chance to survive,” said Smith, holding his son’s dog tags which hung from his neck. “He survived and he was a very active kid. Loved the outdoors. We spent our life outdoors with him when he was little because if he was inside, he was screaming and crying to take him outside.

“His first love, though, was the fire company,” he said. “He joined when he was 16. He was deeply impacted by what happened on 9/11 and the loss of life there.

“He had thought about joining the military for a few years. I was very proud of his decision and his call to serve. I fully supported his decision, but I was scared.”

When the speeches ended, he walked with the other Gold Star parents a short way across a grassy field to the monument, which was hidden beneath black cloth tied with a bright yellow ribbon. It sits on a rise overlooking the cemetery’s main flag pole, on which an immense American flag is hoisted.

On a count of three, Woody Williams and others pulled the cloth away, revealing the polished black granite memorial, emblazoned with a gold star. A center cut-out is of a soldier saluting the flag in the distance and the graves that surround it.

Someone said “wow” as the cloth slipped off and families gathered around to get a look.

Smith said nothing as he walked around the monument. He took pictures. He looked through the saluting soldier cut-out. In the distance, the flag heaved and billowed and rippled on a fresh

breeze.

He held his son's dog tags. His eyes were sad. He let out a breath. Looking at the monument, he said, "This helps. It helps."

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